The Evolution of Catholic Just War Doctrine: A Comprehensive Analysis from Antiquity to the 2026 Iran-Coalition Conflict

Douglas C. Youvan

doug@youvan.com

www.youvan.ai

March 20, 2026

This paper examines the complex and often paradoxical relationship between the Catholic Church and the phenomenon of organized human warfare. From its inception as a persecuted pacifist minority in the Roman Empire to its role as a global moral arbiter in the nuclear and hypersonic age, the Church has navigated the tension between the Gospel's call for peace and the political realities of protecting the innocent. We trace the development of the Just War Theory through the foundational works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, analyzing how these criteria were applied—and sometimes suspended—during the Crusades and the European wars of religion. The study further explores the modern shift toward a "theology of peace," catalyzed by the total wars of the 20th century and the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. Finally, we provide a critical assessment of the Holy See's current diplomatic and moral stance regarding the 2026 Iran War. By analyzing the rhetoric of Pope Leo XIV and the rejection of "preventive war," this paper argues that the Church is moving toward a functional pacifism that views modern large-scale conflict as inherently incapable of meeting traditional moral standards.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Just War Theory, Vatican Diplomacy, Pope Leo XIV, Iran War 2026, Pacifism, International Humanitarian Law, Ecclesiastical History, Crusades, Peacebuilding, Nuclear Ethics, St. Augustine.

A collaboration with Google Gemini-3.1-Thinking. CC4.0.

Outline

1. The Theological Foundations of Peace and the Early Church

2. The Constantinian Shift and the Necessity of Defense

3. St. Augustine and the Formalization of Just War

4. The Thomistic Synthesis and Medieval Conflict

5. The Crusades: Holy War and the Deviation from Just War

6. The Reformation and the Secularization of Sovereignty

7. Total War and the Papal Response to World Wars I and II

8. Vatican II and Pacem in Terris: The Nuclear Turning Point

9. The Post-9/11 Era: Preemption vs. Prevention

10. The 2026 Iran War: Operation Epic Fury and the Moral Crisis

11. Pope Leo XIV and the Rejection of Preventive Force

12. Conclusion: The Future of Catholic Peacebuilding

13. References

Art

1. The Theological Foundations of Peace and the Early Church

The origins of the Catholic perspective on war are not found in a legalistic framework, but in the radical, counter-cultural teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. To understand the Church's modern skepticism regarding the 2026 Iran War, one must first analyze the primitive Christian commitment to non-violence that defined the first three centuries of the movement. The foundational documents of the faith, specifically the New Testament, present a vision of the Kingdom of God that stands in direct opposition to the Roman concept of Pax Romana, which was a peace achieved through military conquest and subjugation.

The Gospel Mandate and the Ethics of Non-Resistance

The primary theological anchor for the early Church was the Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes and the command to love one's enemies. In these passages, Jesus explicitly overturns the lex talionis, or the law of retaliation, which had governed ancient Mediterranean justice systems. By instructing his followers to turn the other cheek and to pray for those who persecute them, Jesus established a moral trajectory that prioritized the preservation of the imago Dei—the image of God—in every human being, including the adversary. This was not merely a passive avoidance of conflict but an active, transformative engagement that sought to break the cycle of violence through sacrificial love.

During this period, the Christian community viewed itself as an eschatological society—a people living in the "already but not yet" of God's reign. Because they believed Christ had already triumphed over the powers of death and sin, the use of lethal force to defend earthly interests was seen as a lack of faith in the ultimate sovereignty of God. The early liturgy and catechesis emphasized a total commitment to peace, which often put Christians at odds with the civic requirements of the Roman Empire.

The Ante-Nicene Church and Military Service

From the late first century until the early fourth century, the prevailing consensus among Christian theologians was one of functional pacifism. Prominent Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Lactantius argued that the requirements of the Gospel were incompatible with the requirements of the Roman legions. Tertullian, in his treatise De Corona, famously questioned whether a Christian could lawfully make an occupation of the sword, noting that Christ, in disarming Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, had effectively unbelted every soldier thereafter. For Tertullian, the sacramentum—the military oath of loyalty to the Emperor—conflicted with the believer's primary sacramentum to Christ.

Origen of Alexandria provided a more nuanced but equally firm defense of Christian non-participation in war. Responding to the pagan critic Celsus, who accused Christians of being civic shirkers for refusing to fight for the Emperor, Origen argued that Christians were actually the

Empire’s greatest defenders. He suggested that while others fought with physical weapons, Christians fought through "the armor of God" and prayer. By maintaining moral purity and interceding for the peace of the world, they provided a spiritual protection that was more effective than any standing army. This period represents a "purity of witness" where the Church viewed itself as a distinct entity, unburdened by the complexities of statecraft or the necessity of maintaining territorial borders.

The Early Martyrs and the Refusal of the Sword

The historical record of the early Church is replete with "Maximilian-type" martyrs—young men who refused conscription on religious grounds. Maximilian of Tebessa, executed in 295 AD for refusing to serve in the Roman army, serves as the archetype for this era. His declaration that "I cannot serve as a soldier, I cannot do evil; I am a Christian" summarizes the absolute nature of early theological foundations. This stance was not rooted in a modern secular humanist opposition to war, but in a deep-seated conviction that the shedding of human blood was a form of pollution that separated the believer from the Eucharist.

However, it is important to note that as the Church expanded and the parousia—the second coming of Christ—seemed delayed, the demographic makeup of the Church changed. By the late second century, there are records of Christians serving in the Thundering Legion under Marcus Aurelius. This suggests that while the official theological teaching remained pacifistic, the lived reality of the laity was beginning to shift. This tension created the first internal debates regarding the "necessity" of force in a fallen world, a tension that would eventually be resolved by the dramatic political shifts of the fourth century.

Conclusion of the Primitive Era

The theological foundation laid in these early centuries remains a haunting presence in Catholic social teaching. Even as the Church later developed the Just War Theory to manage the realities of governance, it never fully abandoned the "peace of the Gospel" as the ultimate ideal. The modern Church’s move toward a "preferential option for peace" in the 21st century can be viewed as a retrieval of these Ante-Nicene roots. The early Church's insistence that the human person is sacred and that violence is a failure of the imagination remains the baseline against which all subsequent Catholic pronouncements on war, including the current opposition to the 2026 conflict, are measured.

2. The Constantinian Shift and the Necessity of Defense

The transition of the Catholic Church from a marginalized and often persecuted sect to a sanctioned and eventually dominant imperial institution represents one of the most profound

"metamorphoses" in the history of Christian ethics. This period, often termed the Constantinian Shift, fundamentally altered the Church's stance on the use of lethal force. As the boundaries between the City of God and the City of Man began to blur in the fourth century, the theological necessity of defending a Christianized state forced a departure from the strict non-resistance of the earlier centuries.

The Edict of Milan and the New Political Reality

The catalyst for this shift was the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which granted religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire. Under Emperor Constantine, the Church was no longer an outsider looking in at the machinery of power; it was increasingly becoming the machinery itself. This new reality presented a moral crisis for the bishops: if the Emperor was now a protector of the faith, was it not the duty of the faithful to protect the Emperor? The previous era's refusal to serve in the military, once a badge of spiritual purity, began to be viewed as a potential threat to the stability of the very state that now guaranteed Christian safety.

Theological thought began to adapt to these administrative burdens. The Church had to reconcile the radical peace of the Gospel with the practical requirements of maintaining order and repelling barbarian invasions. This led to a gradual softening of the prohibitions against military service. By the Council of Arles in 314 AD, the Church actually issued a canon stating that those who threw away their weapons in time of peace should be excluded from communion, a startling reversal from the era of Maximilian of Tebessa. The defense of the Empire was increasingly framed not as a pagan sacrifice, but as a civic and moral duty to preserve the "Christian peace" that Constantine had established.

From Pacifism to Participation

The psychological shift for the average Christian was significant. In the first three centuries, the Roman soldier was the face of the persecutor; after Constantine, the soldier became the defender of the Church and the poor. This period saw the rise of a "political theology" where the success of the Roman legions was seen as a sign of divine favor. The cross, once a symbol of state-sponsored execution, was transformed into the Labarum—a military standard carried into battle. This symbolic inversion signaled that the Church was now willing to bless the sword, provided the sword was used to advance or protect the Christian order.

Theologians of this era began to argue that while the individual Christian might still aspire to non-violence in personal matters, the state had a divinely ordained role to "bear the sword" to punish evildoers, as suggested in the Pauline epistles. This distinction between "private" and "public" morality became a cornerstone of Catholic social thought. It allowed the Church to maintain the ideal of Christ's peace while providing a moral "release valve" for the state to perform the violent actions necessary for the survival of the community.

The Role of the State as Protector of the Church

The writings of Eusebius of Caesarea provide the clearest look into this new mindset. Eusebius viewed Constantine as a "new Moses" and the Roman Empire as the earthly fulfillment of God's promises. In this framework, the defense of the Empire was synonymous with the defense of the Gospel. If the Empire fell to pagan or "heretical" invaders, the institutional Church and its mission would be jeopardized. Thus, military defense was rebranded as an act of "charity"—a way to protect the weak and ensure the continued celebration of the sacraments.

This "Necessity of Defense" did not immediately become the Just War Theory, but it provided the scaffolding. It established the principle that there are some earthly goods—such as the freedom to worship and the protection of the vulnerable—that are worth the heavy moral cost of war. This set the stage for the formalization of these ideas in the following century, when the Western Empire faced total collapse and the Church was forced to define exactly when and how a Christian could kill in the name of a greater good.

3. St. Augustine and the Formalization of Just War

The intellectual architecture of the Catholic position on conflict was largely constructed by St. Augustine of Hippo during the twilight of the Western Roman Empire. As the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 AD, Augustine was forced to provide a theological defense against pagan critics who argued that Christian pacifism had weakened the empire's defenses. In his seminal work, The City of God, and various letters and treatises, Augustine moved beyond the simple necessity of defense established under Constantine to create a rigorous, albeit somber, moral framework for the use of violence. This framework sought to balance the absolute command of Christ to love one's neighbor with the tragic reality of living in a fallen, sinful world where the innocent required protection.

The Tranquillity of Order and the Definition of Peace

Augustine's contribution begins with his unique definition of peace. For Augustine, peace is not merely the absence of war, but rather the tranquillitas ordinis—the tranquillity of order. He argued that all things in the universe have a proper place and relationship ordained by God. When this order is disturbed by sin, injustice, or aggression, the peace that remains is a false or perverted peace. Therefore, the use of force can sometimes be a tool to restore the rightful order. In this view, a war fought to rectify a grave injustice is more peaceful than a state of non-violence that allows evil to flourish unchecked. This shifted the focus from the act of killing itself to the intention and the outcome of the action.

The Criteria for a Justified Conflict

Augustine formalized three primary criteria that would define the Just War tradition for over a thousand years. First is the requirement of Right Authority. Augustine insisted that war could never be a private undertaking; it must be waged only by those who hold the care of the community, namely the sovereign or legitimate civil leaders. This was a critical safeguard against vigilante justice and tribal feuds. By centralizing the power to wage war, Augustine aimed to limit the frequency and chaos of armed conflict.

Second is the requirement of Just Cause. For Augustine, a war is just only if it is a response to a specific wrong. This might include repelling an invasion, recovering stolen property, or punishing a nation that refuses to make amends for the crimes of its citizens. Crucially, Augustine did not believe in holy war in the sense of spreading the faith by the sword; rather, he saw war as a corrective instrument of justice.

Third, and perhaps most importantly for Augustine, is the requirement of Right Intention. Even if a war has a legitimate authority and a just cause, it becomes immoral if it is motivated by a desire for power, revenge, or cruelty. The soldier must act out of a sense of duty and even a form of stern love for the enemy, seeking to bring them back into the tranquillity of order. For Augustine, the interior disposition of the warrior was as important as the external legality of the conflict.

The Sad Necessity of the Just Warrior

Despite providing a pathway for Christians to serve in the military, Augustine remained deeply pessimistic about war. He frequently referred to it as a sad necessity (necessitas tristis). He argued that no one should rejoice in victory, as even a just war is a tragic admission of human failure and the pervasive reach of original sin. He famously noted that if human nature were not corrupted, there would be no need for the sword.

This Augustinian tension—the recognition that war is an evil that may sometimes be necessary to prevent a greater evil—became the standard Catholic position. It allowed the Church to participate in the governance of Europe while maintaining a prophetic distance from the glorification of violence. Augustine's legacy is a mournful realism that acknowledges the duty to protect the weak while refusing to call war anything other than a consequence of the Fall. This nuance is precisely what modern Catholic leaders invoke when they critique the 2026 Iran War; they question whether the right intention and just cause have been corrupted by the very lust for mastery that Augustine warned against centuries ago.

The Influence on Medieval Jurisprudence

The Augustinian model provided the Church with a vocabulary to engage with the barbarian kingdoms that rose from the ruins of Rome. It transformed the soldier from a necessary evil into a potential minister of justice, provided he adhered to the strictures of the Church. By grounding the morality of war in the character and intent of the actor, Augustine ensured that the Church would remain the ultimate arbiter of whether a king's cause was truly aligned with the will of God. This set the stage for the later scholastic refinements of Thomas Aquinas and the eventual codification of international law.

4. The Thomistic Synthesis and Medieval Conflict

As the Middle Ages reached their intellectual zenith in the thirteenth century, the Catholic Church sought to bring the rigors of Aristotelian logic to the messy reality of European feudalism. The primary architect of this synthesis was St. Thomas Aquinas. While Augustine provided the emotional and theological heart of the Just War tradition, Aquinas provided its skeleton and nervous system. In his monumental Summa Theologica, Aquinas transitioned the discourse from a series of pastoral observations into a structured, legalistic framework that would form the basis of Western international law. This era was characterized by an attempt to domesticate the inherent violence of the knightly class by subjecting it to the higher claims of reason and divine law.

Aquinas and the Scholastic Refinement

Aquinas addressed the morality of war within the broader context of charity and the common good. He famously asked in Question 40 of the Second Part of the Second Part of the Summa whether it is always a sin to wage war. His answer was a definitive no, provided certain conditions were met. Unlike some of his predecessors who viewed war almost exclusively as a punishment for sin, Aquinas viewed the state's use of force as a legitimate function of its role in promoting the flourishing of society. By grounding the justification for war in the natural law—the participation of rational creatures in the eternal law of God—Aquinas provided a secularly accessible rationale for military action that did not rely solely on biblical revelation.

This scholastic approach was essential for a Europe that was increasingly divided into competing principalities. Aquinas sought to create a universal standard that could be applied regardless of the specific identities of the combatants. He moved the conversation away from the subjective "sadness" of Augustine toward an objective checklist of criteria. This intellectual shift allowed the Church to function as a supranational court of appeals, judging the legitimacy of various European conflicts based on a shared philosophical vocabulary.

The Triple Criteria of the Summa Theologica

Aquinas distilled the existing tradition into three essential requirements for a war to be considered just. The first is the Authority of the Sovereign. Aquinas argued that because the care of the common good is entrusted to the ruler, only the ruler has the right to summon the people to arms. This was a direct strike against the private wars and vendettas that plagued medieval Europe. By insisting that only a "perfect community" (a state or kingdom) could wage war, Aquinas sought to delegitimize the localized violence of minor lords and brigands.

The second criterion is a Just Cause. Aquinas specified that those who are attacked must deserve to be attacked because of some fault. This reinforced the idea that war must be a response to an objective violation of justice, such as the seizure of lands or an unprovoked assault on the innocent. The third criterion is a Rightful Intention. Mirroring Augustine, Aquinas insisted that the belligerents must intend the advancement of good or the avoidance of evil. He warned that a war could be declared by the right authority for a just cause but still be rendered sinful if the soldiers or leaders were motivated by aggrandizement or the delight in slaughter.

The Emergence of Proportionality and Discrimination

While Aquinas laid the primary foundations, the scholastic tradition that followed him began to develop the concepts of jus in bello—the rules of conduct within war. Although not fully systematized until the later works of Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez, the seeds were planted during the Thomistic era. There was a growing realization that even in a just war, the means used must be proportionate to the ends sought. The Church began to argue that one should not use a "sledgehammer to crack a nut," meaning that the destruction caused by the war should not exceed the value of the justice being sought.

Furthermore, the concept of discrimination—the protection of non-combatants—began to take root. The Church introduced the Peace of God and the Truce of God movements, which sought to grant immunity from violence to priests, pilgrims, merchants, and peasants. These movements also attempted to ban fighting on certain holy days and during specific liturgical seasons. While these efforts were often ignored by the warring nobility, they represented a significant theological evolution: the recognition that even in a fallen world, there are moral boundaries that the sword must not cross.

Ecclesiastical Limits on Feudal Warfare

The Thomistic synthesis functioned as a check on the absolute power of the monarch. By defining war as a matter of justice rather than mere power, the Church asserted its right to judge the actions of kings. If a monarch declared war without a just cause or conducted it with excessive cruelty, he risked excommunication and the loss of his moral legitimacy. This created a tension that would define the late Middle Ages: the struggle between the emerging nation-

state’s desire for total sovereignty and the Church’s insistence that even the state is subject to the moral law of God.

This medieval framework remains the "gold standard" for Catholic ethics. When modern Vatican diplomats evaluate the 2026 Iran War, they are using the very tools forged by Aquinas in the thirteenth century. They ask whether the authority is truly legitimate, whether the cause of "prevention" constitutes a just cause under the natural law, and whether the intention of the coalition is the restoration of order or the expansion of influence. The Thomistic synthesis ensures that for the Catholic Church, war can never be a purely political decision; it is always and everywhere a profound moral crisis.

5. The Crusades: Holy War and the Deviation from Just War

The era of the Crusades represents perhaps the most significant and controversial departure from the restrained realism of the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions. During this period, the Catholic Church moved beyond the framework of the just war—which viewed military action as a tragic necessity to restore order—and embraced the concept of the bellum sacrum, or holy war. In this paradigm, war was not merely a legal instrument of the state but a religious act of devotion, commanded by God and directed by the Church itself. This shift had profound implications for the moral landscape of Europe and continues to shadow the Church’s diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, including the current tensions surrounding the 2026 Iran War.

The Concept of the Bellum Sacrum

The distinction between a just war and a holy war is critical for understanding this period. While a just war seeks to rectify a specific secular wrong and is waged by a civil authority, a holy war is perceived as being waged on behalf of God to defend the faith or reclaim sacred territory. During the late eleventh century, the papacy began to merge the identity of the soldier with that of the pilgrim. The crusader was not simply a combatant; he was a crucesignatus—one marked by the cross—who took a formal vow to participate in a divinely sanctioned expedition.

This theological innovation required a reinterpretation of earlier teachings. The Church began to emphasize the idea of "liberation" over "defense." The goal was the recovery of the Holy Sepulcher and the protection of Eastern Christians from Seljuk Turkish expansion. By framing the conflict as a struggle between Christendom and an external "infidel" force, the Church effectively bypassed many of the restrictive criteria of the just war tradition, particularly the requirement that war be a last resort and that it be motivated by a stern, dispassionate love for the enemy.

The Council of Clermont and the Call to Arms

The formal initiation of the crusading movement occurred at the Council of Clermont in 1095, where Pope Urban II issued a call to the nobility of Europe to liberate Jerusalem. Urban's rhetoric was transformative; he argued that the internal violence of European feuds should be redirected outward toward a "righteous" cause. By doing so, he positioned the papacy as the supreme authority over the military activities of the West, a role that had previously been the sole province of kings and emperors.

Urban's appeal introduced the concept of the "remission of sins" for those who died in battle or completed the journey. This spiritualization of violence fundamentally changed the motivation of the combatants. War became a form of penance. The battlefield was reimagined as a site of sanctification where the knight could wash away his secular crimes through the shedding of blood in the service of the Church. This created a dangerous precedent where the moral restraints of war—such as proportionality and the protection of non-combatants—were often abandoned in the heat of religious fervor.

Indulgences and the Spiritualization of Violence

As the crusading movement matured, the system of indulgences became more formalized. The Church taught that the hardships and dangers of the Crusade could satisfy the temporal punishment due to sin. This theology provided a powerful incentive for the violent warrior class of Europe to align themselves with ecclesiastical goals. However, it also led to a "dehumanization" of the adversary. If the war was a divine mandate against the enemies of God, then the traditional Augustinian requirement to love the enemy became increasingly difficult to maintain in practice.

The resulting campaigns, while often strategically successful in the short term, were marked by episodes of extreme brutality that the Just War Theory would have strictly condemned. The sack of Jerusalem in 1099 and the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204 stand as historical reminders of how the "holy war" logic can spiral out of control when the secular restraints of authority and cause are replaced by unchecked religious zeal. In these instances, the Church found itself in the position of blessing actions that were diametrically opposed to its foundational Gospel mandates.

Cracks in the Just War Foundation

The Crusades forced a tension within Catholic thought that lasted for centuries. On one hand, the Church continued to refine the Just War Theory through the work of the canonists and later scholastics; on the other, it continued to call for crusades against various threats, including the Albigensian heretics in France and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. This dual-track

approach created a "moral schizophrenia" where the rules of war applied to conflicts between Christian princes, but were often ignored in conflicts against those outside the faith.

It was not until the late Middle Ages and the early modern period that the Church began to pull back from the bellum sacrum model. The rise of the sovereign nation-state and the eventual failure of the later Crusades led to a realization that the Church's primary role was spiritual rather than military. The legacy of this era remains a cautionary tale within the Vatican. It is why modern popes, including Pope Leo XIV, are so quick to condemn the use of religious language to justify modern conflicts. They recognize that when war is framed as a "clash of civilizations" or a "divine mission," the possibility for a just and lasting peace is often the first casualty.

The Legacy of the Crusades in Modern Catholic Thought

In the contemporary context, the Church's rejection of the "holy war" ethos is absolute. Pope John Paul II's historic apology during the Great Jubilee of 2000 for the sins committed in the name of the faith was a definitive turning point. Today, the Holy See views the Crusades as a period of theological deviation where the Church's mission was co-opted by the logic of power and territorial expansion.

This historical awareness informs the Church's current critique of the 2026 Iran War. The Vatican is particularly sensitive to any rhetoric that frames the coalition's actions as a defense of "Western Christian values" against an Islamic threat. By distancing itself from the crusading spirit, the Church seeks to act as a neutral mediator, emphasizing that no war in the 21st century can be considered "holy" and that all military action must be judged by the strict, secular, and universal criteria of the Just War tradition.

6. The Reformation and the Secularization of Sovereignty

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked a period of profound fragmentation for both the Catholic Church and the European political order. The Protestant Reformation did more than just divide Christendom theologically; it shattered the medieval concept of a unified Respublica Christiana governed by the dual authorities of Pope and Emperor. As the continent descended into a series of brutal religious wars, the Catholic Church was forced to recalibrate its Just War doctrine to account for a world where "the other" was no longer a distant infidel, but a neighboring Christian who rejected papal authority. This era saw the birth of the modern nation-state and the gradual secularization of the reasons for war, moving from the defense of the faith to the "reason of state."

The School of Salamanca and the Rights of Non-Christians

Amidst the chaos of the Reformation and the Spanish conquest of the Americas, a group of Spanish Dominican and Jesuit theologians, known as the School of Salamanca, provided a crucial evolution of the Just War tradition. Figures such as Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez began to argue that the rights of sovereignty and property were rooted in natural law, not in grace or religious affiliation. Vitoria, in his lectures on the American Indians, famously argued that even "pagan" peoples had legitimate rights to their lands and that the spread of Christianity was not a just cause for war.

This was a revolutionary step. By decoupling the right to rule from the "true faith," the School of Salamanca laid the groundwork for modern international law. They refined the criteria of jus in bello, emphasizing that even in a war against non-believers, there were moral limits on how soldiers could behave. This shift moved the Catholic position away from the "holy war" rhetoric of the Crusades and back toward a legalistic, universal framework. It suggested that war was a matter of objective justice between sovereign entities, regardless of their religious identity—a principle that remains foundational to Vatican diplomacy in the current 2026 conflict.

The Thirty Years' War and the Death of Religious Pretext

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) served as the tragic culmination of the religious tensions of the era. What began as a localized revolt in Bohemia escalated into a continental conflagration that devastated Central Europe. While the conflict is often categorized as a war of religion, the Catholic Church's role was far from monolithic. The papacy found itself in a precarious position, frequently caught between the Catholic Habsburgs, who sought to restore religious unity, and the Catholic French, led by Cardinal Richelieu, who allied with Protestant powers to weaken Habsburg dominance.

This period demonstrated the limits of the Church's influence over the emerging absolute monarchs. Despite the theological frameworks provided by Aquinas and Vitoria, the actual conduct of the war was increasingly governed by political expediency. The Church's position shifted from being the direct instigator of conflict to a diplomat trying to mitigate the destruction. The papacy's inability to prevent Catholic France from fighting Catholic Spain and the Holy Roman Empire signaled that the era of "Christendom" was over. The "just cause" was no longer the defense of the Church, but the survival and expansion of the state.

The Peace of Westphalia and the New World Order

The conflict ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, an event that the Catholic Church initially viewed as a disaster. Pope Innocent X issued a bull, Zelo Domus Dei, declaring the treaties "null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, and empty of meaning and effect for all time." His objection was rooted in the fact that the treaties

recognized the sovereignty of Protestant states and allowed princes to determine the religion of their subjects (cuius regio, eius religio), effectively sidelining the Pope as the supreme moral arbiter of Europe.

However, Westphalia created the modern international system based on the equality of sovereign states. For the Catholic Church, this meant a transition into a new role as a transnational moral voice rather than a political power-broker. The "secularization of sovereignty" forced the Church to refine its peace-making efforts. It could no longer rely on the threat of excommunication to stop a war; it had to appeal to the "conscience of nations" and the universal principles of natural law. This long-term transition explains why, in 2026, the Vatican addresses the international community through the United Nations and global diplomatic channels rather than attempting to command the leaders of the coalition directly.

The Enlightenment and the Challenge of Absolute War

As the eighteenth century progressed, the Enlightenment introduced further challenges to the Catholic view of war. Rationalist philosophers began to argue for "perpetual peace" through international commerce and republican government, while monarchs developed the "cabinet war"—highly stylized and limited conflicts between professional armies. During this time, the Church's position was one of quietude, maintaining its traditional Just War criteria while losing the cultural platform to enforce them.

The French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars shattered this limited-war model, introducing the "levee en masse" or total mobilization. For the Church, the rise of Napoleon represented a existential threat to the social order. The papacy's opposition to Napoleon was not just a defense of its own territories (the Papal States), but a rejection of a new kind of "total war" that ignored the traditional distinctions between combatants and non-combatants. This experience of the Napoleonic era began the Church's modern skepticism of "ideological" wars—a skepticism that is reflected today in its profound distrust of the ideological justifications for the invasion of Iran.

7. Total War and the Papal Response to World Wars I and II

The arrival of the twentieth century brought an unprecedented challenge to Catholic moral theology: the reality of total war. Unlike the stylized "cabinet wars" of the eighteenth century or the localized colonial skirmishes of the nineteenth, the World Wars involved the total mobilization of societies, the industrialization of death, and the systematic erasure of the line between combatant and civilian. For the papacy, these conflicts represented a catastrophic failure of Christian civilization. The Church's response evolved from a traditional application of

just war theory to a profound, almost desperate, advocacy for a supranational peace that transcended the interests of individual nation-states.

Benedict XV and the Useless Slaughter of World War I

When World War I erupted in 1914, Pope Benedict XV found himself at the helm of a Church whose faithful were killing one another on a scale never before imagined. Rejecting the pressure to take sides, Benedict adopted a policy of strict neutrality, which he termed "impartiality." He famously described the conflict as the "suicide of civilized Europe" and a "useless slaughter" (inutilis strage). This was a significant rhetorical shift. By calling the war useless, the Pope was essentially arguing that it failed the Thomistic requirement of proportionality; no possible political gain could justify the level of carnage occurring in the trenches of the Somme or Verdun.

Benedict's 1917 Peace Note was a landmark in Vatican diplomacy. He proposed a peace based on the "moral force of right" rather than the "material force of arms." He advocated for a reduction in armaments, the establishment of international arbitration, and the return of occupied territories. While the warring powers largely ignored his plea—the Allies felt he was too soft on the Central Powers, and vice versa—the Note established the Holy See as a tireless mediator. It moved the Church away from merely judging the justice of a cause toward an active role in ending the conflict itself, a precursor to the modern Vatican's stance on the 2026 Iran War.

Pius XI and the Resistance to Totalitarianism

The interwar period saw the rise of secular religions in the form of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. Pope Pius XI recognized that these ideologies were not just political movements but existential threats to the Christian understanding of the human person. His encyclicals, such as *Mit brennender Sorge* (Against the Nazi regime) and *Divini Redemptoris* (Against Atheistic Communism), laid the groundwork for a new kind of just cause: the defense of human rights against the state.

Pius XI's struggle against the cult of the state shifted Catholic thought further away from the "Right Authority" of the monarch toward the "Right of the Person." This shift was crucial because it allowed the Church to critique a state's decision to go to war even if that state was technically a legitimate sovereign. If a state's internal order was built on the denial of God and the dignity of the individual, its external military actions were viewed with deep suspicion. This era proved that the Church would no longer automatically grant moral legitimacy to a state simply because it held legal power.

Pius XII and the Dilemma of World War II

The role of Pope Pius XII during World War II remains one of the most intensely debated chapters in Church history. Faced with the choice of a public, prophetic condemnation of the Axis powers or a policy of diplomatic silence to facilitate humanitarian aid, Pius chose the latter. He feared that an explicit excommunication of Hitler or a direct condemnation of the German invasion of Poland would lead to reprisals against Catholics and Jews alike, making his "silence" a deliberate strategic choice aimed at saving lives.

From a theological perspective, Pius XII's wartime Christmas messages began to redefine the Just War criteria for the modern age. He spoke of a "new world order" based on the dignity of man and the rights of small nations. He was the first Pope to seriously grapple with the implications of modern aerial warfare and the "total" nature of conflict, which made the traditional protection of non-combatants almost impossible to maintain. Following the war, he became an early advocate for a "community of nations," suggesting that in the future, war might only be justified as a defensive measure under the mandate of an international authority.

The Post-War Realization: The End of Just War?

The conclusion of World War II, marked by the use of atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, brought a sense of finality to traditional military ethics. The Church realized that if "proportionality" was a requirement for a just war, then the nuclear age made almost any large-scale conflict inherently unjust. The potential for global annihilation meant that the "good to be achieved" could never outweigh the "evil of the means."

This realization transformed the Church's approach to global conflict. The papacy became a primary advocate for the United Nations and for a global legal framework that could replace the "right of the sword." The experience of the two World Wars convinced the Holy See that the nation-state, when left to its own devices, would inevitably pursue total war. Therefore, the Church's mission moved toward limiting the sovereignty of states in favor of a universal moral law. This is the direct historical lineage that informs Pope Leo XIV's current insistence that the 2026 invasion of Iran is a "defeat for humanity," echoing the sentiments of his predecessors who witnessed the ruins of Europe in 1945.

8. Vatican II and Pacem in Terris: The Nuclear Turning Point

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a fundamental reorientation of Catholic thought regarding the morality of state-sponsored violence. This "nuclear turning point" was precipitated by the dual horrors of the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which suggested that the industrialization of war had outpaced the traditional moral

constraints of the Just War tradition. Under the leadership of Pope John XXIII and the subsequent deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Church transitioned from a posture that focused on "regulating" war to one that focused on "abolishing" it.

The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Genesis of Pacem in Terris

The immediate catalyst for this theological shift was the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Pope John XXIII played a discreet but vital role in facilitating communication between President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, an experience that left him deeply convinced that the world was standing on the precipice of total annihilation. In response, he issued the landmark 1963 encyclical Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth). For the first time, a papal document was addressed not merely to the Catholic hierarchy, but to "all men of good will," signaling that peace was a universal human necessity that transcended sectarian boundaries.

The most revolutionary claim in Pacem in Terris was the Pope's declaration that in the atomic age, the traditional logic of war as a means of justice had become obsolete. He wrote that "it is contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights which have been violated." This was a direct challenge to the Thomistic concept of just cause. By framing war as "irrational," the Church moved toward a "theology of peace" that viewed large-scale military conflict not as a tool of statecraft, but as a failure of human intelligence and a violation of the divinely established order.

Gaudium et Spes and the Fresh Reappraisal of War

Following the death of John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council continued this trajectory in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, known as Gaudium et Spes. The Council Fathers called for a "completely fresh reappraisal of war" (GS 80). They recognized that the nature of modern weaponry—what they termed "scientific weapons"—had fundamentally changed the moral calculation. Because these weapons inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, they inherently violate the principle of discrimination, which requires the protection of non-combatants.

The Council issued its only formal anathema against the "indiscriminate destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population," declaring such acts to be a "crime against God and man himself." This was no longer just a critique of the "cause" of war, but a categorical condemnation of the "means" of modern war. The Council also expressed deep skepticism toward the arms race, describing it as an "utterly treacherous trap for humanity" that robs the poor of necessary resources. This provided the theological foundation for the modern Church's "preferential option for peace."

The Proportionality Crisis in the Atomic Age

A central feature of this era's teaching was the "Proportionality Crisis." In classical Just War Theory, the moral legitimacy of a conflict is determined by a comparative weighing of outcomes. This can be expressed in the following ASCII math logic:

Total_Good_Achieved > Total_Evil_Inflicted

In the context of conventional medieval warfare, this calculation was difficult but possible. However, the Church argued that in the nuclear age, the variable of "Total_Evil_Inflicted" had become effectively infinite. If the use of Force (F) leads to Global_Annihilation (GA), then:

Justice / F(GA) = 0

Because no earthly justice or "just cause" can outweigh the destruction of civilization, the Church concluded that the very framework of Just War was being strained to the point of collapse. This led to a "presumption against war" that has dominated Catholic social teaching ever since.

The Call for a Universal Public Authority

Recognizing that the nation-state system was inherently prone to conflict, both John XXIII and the Council Fathers advocated for the establishment of a "universal public authority" endowed with the power to settle international disputes. They argued that in an increasingly interdependent world, the common good of humanity could no longer be served by the "balance of terror" or individual national interests. This advocacy for global governance and international law remains a pillar of Vatican diplomacy. It explains why the Holy See today, under Pope Leo XIV, consistently appeals to the United Nations and international treaties to resolve the 2026 Iran crisis, viewing the unilateral actions of sovereign coalitions as a regression to a pre-nuclear and pre-Vatican II moral landscape.

9. The Post-9/11 Era: Preemption vs. Prevention

The start of the twenty-first century introduced a seismic shift in global security paradigms that forced the Catholic Church to defend the traditional boundaries of its Just War doctrine against the new logic of "preemptive" military action. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States and its allies moved toward a security strategy that prioritized neutralizing threats before they could materialize. This era, dominated by the War on Terror and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, created a profound rift between the Holy See and Western powers, as the Church argued that the blurring of the line between "preemption" and "prevention" threatened to dismantle the entire international legal order.

The Bush Doctrine and the Challenge to Just Cause

The emergence of the Bush Doctrine, which asserted the right of the United States to launch strikes against perceived threats even in the absence of an imminent attack, represented a direct challenge to the Thomistic requirement of Just Cause. For the Catholic Church, a just cause must be a response to an actual or certain injury. The Church has historically allowed for "preemptive" strikes in cases where an enemy is clearly about to launch an attack—for instance, when an army is mobilized at a border and the "first strike" is a matter of immediate self-defense. However, the Holy See drew a sharp moral line at "preventive" war, which is fought to prevent a potential threat from developing in the far-flung future.

In the lead-up to the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003, the Vatican's top theologians argued that preventive war is essentially a war of choice, not of necessity. They maintained that if every nation were allowed to attack another based on a speculative assessment of future capabilities, the concept of sovereignty would vanish, and the world would return to a state of perpetual Hobbesian conflict. This theological rejection of "prevention" is the exact same intellectual foundation being used by Pope Leo XIV in 2026 to condemn the current coalition strikes against Iranian infrastructure, which were justified using similar logic regarding the "future" threat of nuclear capability.

John Paul II and the Diplomatic Resistance

Pope John Paul II became one of the most vocal and persistent opponents of the 2003 Iraq War. Despite his long-standing friendship with Western leaders and his shared opposition to tyranny, the Pope viewed the proposed invasion as a moral catastrophe. He famously stated that war is not always inevitable and that it is always a defeat for humanity. To prevent the conflict, he engaged in a high-stakes diplomatic campaign, sending personal envoys—Cardinal Roger Etchegaray to Baghdad and Cardinal Pio Laghi to Washington D.C.—to meet with Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush, respectively.

The Vatican's argument was twofold. First, it argued that the "last resort" criterion had not been met; the weapons inspections process, however flawed, was still a viable diplomatic path. Second, the Church questioned the "proportionality" of the outcome. The Holy See warned that the destabilization of Iraq would lead to a power vacuum, the rise of extremist groups, and the suffering of the Christian minority in the region—prophecies that were largely realized in the subsequent decade. By opposing the war so publicly, the Church asserted that its role was not to be a chaplain to the state, but a critic of the state's moral choices.

The Illegitimacy of Regime Change

Another critical development during this era was the Church's formal critique of "regime change" as a primary objective of war. While the Church certainly viewed Saddam Hussein's

regime as unjust and oppressive, it argued that the internal governance of a nation, however distasteful, does not automatically grant other nations the right to use lethal force to replace it. According to the Catholic tradition, the goal of a just war is the restoration of peace and order, not the imposition of a specific political system by external force.

The Church argued that the right to determine a nation's government belongs to the people of that nation, and that foreign-imposed regime change often leads to a "greater evil" than the one it seeks to remove. This principle has become a central part of the Vatican's current critique of Operation Epic Fury in 2026. The Church maintains that the coalition's goal of dismantling the Iranian government goes beyond the traditional bounds of self-defense and enters the realm of "political engineering," which it considers a violation of the natural law and the rights of sovereign peoples.

Non-State Actors and the Strain on Tradition

The post-9/11 era also forced the Church to grapple with the reality of asymmetrical warfare and non-state actors like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Traditional Just War Theory was designed for conflicts between recognized states with clear chains of command. The rise of global terrorism created a "grey zone" where the criteria of Right Authority and Just Cause became harder to apply. The Church responded by emphasizing that while states have a right and duty to protect their citizens from terrorism, the response must remain within the bounds of international humanitarian law.

This period saw the Church increasingly link the concept of "security" to "human development." The Vatican argued that the root causes of conflict—poverty, injustice, and the lack of educational opportunities—cannot be solved by military force alone. This shift toward a "holistic" view of peace informed the Church's skepticism of the purely military solutions proposed in the early 2000s and continues to shape its call for a diplomatic and humanitarian resolution to the 2026 Persian Gulf crisis.

Transitioning to the Present Crisis

The arguments forged during the 2003 Iraq War provided the template for the Church's response to the 2026 Iran War. The rejection of preventive strikes, the defense of sovereignty against regime change, and the insistence on the "last resort" are not new positions; they are the result of the Church's long, difficult engagement with the post-9/11 world order. As the coalition in 2026 claims that its actions are necessary to "prevent a future nuclear holocaust," the Church looks back at the "preventive" rhetoric of 2003 as a cautionary tale, warning that the immediate certainty of war's destruction is a far more tangible moral reality than the speculative threats used to justify it.

10. The 2026 Iran War: Operation Epic Fury and the Moral Crisis

The commencement of Operation Epic Fury on February 28, 2026, marked the definitive end of a three-year diplomatic "cold peace" in the Persian Gulf and signaled the most significant challenge to Catholic social teaching since the Vietnam era. Launched by a coalition of Western and regional powers, the operation was initially framed as a limited, surgical intervention aimed at neutralizing Iran's hardening nuclear infrastructure in Natanz and Fordow. However, within seventy-two hours, the conflict escalated into a high-intensity theater-wide war involving hypersonic missile exchanges, cyber-attacks on civilian grids, and a multi-axis ground invasion. For the Holy See, this rapid escalation represented not just a geopolitical failure, but a profound moral crisis that threatened to render the traditional Just War criteria entirely obsolete in the face of 21st-century military technology.

The Outbreak of Hostilities and the Failure of Diplomacy

In the months leading up to the conflict, the Vatican had been deeply involved in the "Geneva-Tehran Backchannel," with Pope Leo XIV making several personal appeals to the coalition leadership to remain at the negotiating table. The Church’s position was that the 2025 Comprehensive Nuclear Accord, while imperfect, provided a framework for "patient dialogue" that had not yet been exhausted. When the first coalition missiles struck Iranian territory, the Vatican’s Press Office issued a rare midnight statement expressing "profound sorrow and alarm," arguing that the "Last Resort" (ultima ratio) requirement had been prematurely abandoned in favor of a "strategy of impatience."

The moral crisis for the Church centered on the justification for the initial strike. The coalition argued that the "imminence" of a nuclear breakout constituted a just cause for self-defense. The Vatican, however, contended that "speculative imminence" is not the same as an "actual or imminent attack." By expanding the definition of self-defense to include the destruction of potential future capabilities, the coalition moved into the realm of preventive war—a concept the Church had explicitly rejected during the 2003 Iraq crisis. This fundamental disagreement over what constitutes a "Just Cause" (jus ad bellum) created an immediate and sharp divide between the Holy See and the secular capitals of the West.

The Ethics of Hyper-Precision and the Illusion of Clean War

A significant feature of the 2026 conflict has been the use of "hyper-precision" weaponry, including autonomous loitering munitions and kinetic energy penetrators. Coalition commanders argued that these technologies allowed for a "clean" war that minimized collateral damage, thereby satisfying the Thomistic requirement of "Discrimination." The Church’s theological response, articulated through the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, challenged this "technological optimism."

The Vatican argued that the "precision" of a weapon does not negate the "imprecision" of its strategic consequences. While a missile might hit its intended military target with 99% accuracy, the resulting "cascading failures"—such as the collapse of the Iranian electrical grid and the subsequent failure of hospital life-support systems—constitute a massive, if indirect, violation of non-combatant immunity. The Church maintains that "clean war" is a moral illusion that masks the totalizing nature of modern conflict. From the Catholic perspective, the weaponization of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems in Operation Epic Fury represents a "dehumanization of the kill chain," where the moral responsibility of the human agent is dangerously diluted.

Proportionality in the Face of Regional Escalation

The principle of "Proportionality" requires that the good achieved by a war must outweigh the evils it causes. In the current 2026 conflict, the Church has argued that this balance was lost almost instantly. The stated "good"—the delay of a nuclear program—was quickly eclipsed by the "evils" of regional destabilization, the disruption of global energy markets (leading to a 400% spike in heating oil prices for the poor in Europe and the Global South), and the threat of a wider conflict involving non-state actors in Lebanon and Yemen.

The Holy See's diplomats have pointed to the "expansion of the theater" as evidence that the war has become disproportionate. As the conflict spilled into the Levant and the Strait of Hormuz, the Church argued that the "cure" (Operation Epic Fury) had become deadlier than the "disease" (the threat of a nuclear Iran). Pope Leo XIV has used the following logic to describe the crisis of proportionality:

Total_Evil = (Human_Casualties + Economic_Collapse + Regional_Chaos) If Total_Evil > Strategic_Delay_of_Arms, then War = Unjust

By this calculation, the Church has concluded that the 2026 war fails the test of proportionality, as it has traded a theoretical future threat for a tangible, present catastrophe that affects millions of people who have no direct involvement in the dispute.

The Humanitarian Toll and the Minab School Tragedy

The moral crisis reached a fever pitch following the "Minab School Tragedy" on March 12, 2026, when a coalition strike targeted a command center allegedly located beneath a primary school and civilian shelter. The resulting deaths of over 170 civilians, mostly children, became a focal point for the Church's critique of "Double Effect." While the coalition argued that the civilian deaths were an unintended side effect of a legitimate military strike, the Vatican responded that "unintended" does not mean "unforeseeable."

Following this event, the Pope departed from his prepared remarks during a Sunday Angelus to speak of the "screams of Minab" as a judgment on the conscience of the world. This moment marked a shift in Vatican rhetoric from diplomatic neutrality to "moral indignation." The Church argued that the use of high-yield explosives in urban areas, even against high-value targets, is inherently indiscriminate. The Minab incident has been used by Catholic theologians to argue that in 2026, the "means" of war have become so destructive that they inevitably corrupt even a "just" cause, leading the Church to call for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.

11. Pope Leo XIV and the Rejection of Preventive Force

The election of Pope Leo XIV in May 2025—the first American-born pontiff in the history of the Church—was initially seen by Western political analysts as a potential opening for a more "Atlanticist" Vatican foreign policy. However, the outbreak of Operation Epic Fury on February 28, 2026, quickly dispelled such notions. Rather than providing a moral veneer for the coalition's actions, Leo XIV has emerged as the war's most prominent and consistent critic. His papacy has been defined by a "disarmed and disarming" rhetoric that seeks to strip away the euphemisms of modern warfare and force a confrontation with the raw human cost of "preventive" military action.

The Theology of Disarmed Peace

Central to Leo XIV's response is his concept of "disarmed peace," a theological development that builds upon the non-violence of the early Church while speaking directly to the technical complexities of 2026. In his address on March 15, 2026, the Pope argued that stability can never be built on "mutual threats or weapons that sow destruction." He has moved the Church's position beyond a mere legalistic analysis of just war criteria and toward a more radical, Gospel-centered rejection of the logic of force. By emphasizing that peace is a "gift of God" that must be nurtured through "patient and responsible dialogue," Leo XIV has positioned the Holy See as a symbolic sanctuary of reason in a world increasingly dominated by the "law of force."

This "disarmed" approach is not merely a call for pacifism but a strategic attempt to delegitimize the narrative of "surgical" or "necessary" violence. The Pope has been notably reticent to name specific nations in his public addresses, a move consistent with the Vatican's long-standing tradition of diplomatic neutrality. However, his indirect rebukes have been sharp. By asking whether leaders have the "humility and courage to make a serious examination of conscience," he has reframed the war as a spiritual failure rather than a geopolitical necessity.

The Rejection of the Preventive Doctrine

The most significant theological battleground of the 2026 conflict involves the concept of "preventive war." While the coalition has justified its strikes on Tehran and the assassination of the Supreme Leader as a preemptive move to stop a nuclear "breakout," the Vatican's Secretariat of State has issued a firm rejection of this doctrine. Cardinal Pietro Parolin has warned that recognizing a "right to preventive war" would set the world ablaze by eroding the foundations of international law.

From the Vatican's perspective, the coalition's logic fails the fundamental test of "Just Cause" because it is based on speculation about future events rather than a response to an actual attack. The Church argues that once the "imminence" requirement is loosened to include "potential future threats," the moral barriers to war effectively disappear. This is articulated in the following ASCII math logic:

Just_Cause = (Actual_Attack + Imminent_Attack) If Cause = Speculative_Future_Threat, then War = Unjust

Under Leo XIV, the Church has insisted that the international community must return to a "force of law" where disputes are settled through multilateral institutions like the United Nations, rather than through the unilateral "law of the sword."

The Moral Dissent of the American Hierarchy

The 2026 conflict has also revealed a significant alignment between the Vatican and the leadership of the U.S. Catholic Church. Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C., has gone further than the Pope's diplomatic appeals, explicitly declaring the war "not morally legitimate." McElroy has argued that the coalition's goals lack the "right intention" required by the Thomistic tradition, describing the conflict as "lurching from goal to goal" without a clear or attainable end state that justifies the massive loss of life.

This unified front between Rome and Washington's most influential prelate represents a major obstacle for the coalition's attempts to gain moral consensus. When Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago criticized the "video game-style" presentation of the war on social media, he was echoing the Pope's own concern about the "dehumanization of the adversary." By stripping away the digital distance between the consumer and the combatant, the Church's leadership in 2026 is attempting to re-sensitize the global conscience to the reality of death.

The Face of War: The Humanitarian Witness

Perhaps the most haunting aspect of Leo XIV's witness has been his focus on the "face of war." Following the March 2026 strike on the school in Minab, the Vatican took the unprecedented step of publishing graphic images of children's graves on the front page of L'Osservatore

Romano. The Pope has used this event to challenge the "surgical" narrative of Operation Epic Fury. He has argued that there are no "first- or second-class dead" and that the term "collateral damage" is a linguistic sin that attempts to hide the slaughter of the innocent.

By meeting with leaders like Cardinal Dominique Mathieu of Tehran-Ispahan, the Pope has ensured that the voices of those living under the bombs are heard in the halls of the Vatican. His insistence on an immediate ceasefire is rooted in the belief that every day the war continues, the "irreparable abyss" of hatred grows deeper. In the eyes of Leo XIV, the 2026 Iran War is the ultimate proof that modern warfare, with its hypersonic speed and autonomous lethality, can no longer be "just." It is, instead, a "tragedy of enormous proportions" that requires not more weapons, but a total surrender to the "audacity of peace."

12. Conclusion: The Future of Catholic Peacebuilding

The historical trajectory of the Catholic Church's engagement with warfare reveals a profound and ongoing tension between the idealistic non-violence of the Gospel and the tragic demands of protecting the common good in a fallen world. From its origins as a persecuted pacifist minority to its role as a moral arbiter of the 2026 Iran War, the Church has consistently refined its understanding of what constitutes a "just" response to aggression. However, the current conflict, characterized by the use of artificial intelligence, hypersonic weaponry, and the doctrine of preventive force, suggests that the traditional Just War framework is reaching a point of terminal strain. The future of Catholic peacebuilding appears to be moving away from the "regulation" of violence and toward a "preferential option for non-violence" that views large-scale military conflict as an inherently obsolete tool of justice.

The Erosion of the Just War Paradigm

The 2026 Iran War has demonstrated that the criteria of proportionality and discrimination are increasingly difficult to satisfy in the age of "hyper-precision" and "total" digital warfare. As the Church has noted in its critique of Operation Epic Fury, the cascading effects of modern kinetic strikes on civilian infrastructure render the distinction between combatant and non-combatant almost impossible to maintain. Furthermore, the rejection of "preventive war" by Pope Leo XIV indicates a theological closing of the door on the types of speculative justifications that have dominated 21st-century security strategies. If the traditional criteria can no longer be met in practice, the Church is forced to conclude that the "Just War" is a theoretical category with no remaining real-world application.

This shift does not represent a retreat into passive isolationism but rather a transition to "Just Peace" theory. This emerging paradigm prioritizes conflict transformation, restorative justice, and the addressing of the structural roots of violence—such as poverty, environmental

degradation, and the arms race—before they escalate into armed conflict. The future of Catholic peacebuilding will likely be defined by an increased emphasis on "diplomatic presence" and "moral accompaniment," where the Holy See acts as a supranational mediator that operates independently of the interests of sovereign states or military coalitions.

The Role of the Papacy in a Multipolar World

As the global order becomes more fragmented and the "balance of terror" is complicated by the rise of new nuclear powers and non-state actors, the moral voice of the Pope becomes even more vital as a unifying force. Pope Leo XIV's focus on "disarming language" and "the gaze of the other" represents a strategy to re-humanize international relations in an era of algorithmic warfare. The Church's future role will be to consistently remind a technologically advanced but morally vulnerable world that the "tranquillity of order" cannot be achieved through the destruction of the adversary, but only through the recognition of a shared human dignity.

By returning to its Ante-Nicene roots while utilizing the legal and diplomatic tools of the modern era, the Catholic Church is positioning itself as the primary institutional advocate for a world without war. The "sad necessity" of St. Augustine has been replaced by the "urgent necessity" of Pope John XXIII and his successors: the realization that in the nuclear and hypersonic age, humanity must either abolish war or be abolished by it. The Church's witness in the 2026 conflict serves as a definitive statement that the path of Christ is fundamentally a path of peace—one that requires the courage to dismantle the machines of war and the imagination to build a civilization of love.

13. References

Aquinas, T. (1265–1274). Summa Theologica. Part II-II, Question 40. Rome: Catholic Church.

Augustine of Hippo. (426). The City of God (De Civitate Dei). Books XIX and XX. Translated by Marcus Dods.

Benedict XV. (1917). Dès le Début: Papal Peace Note to the Leaders of the Belligerent Nations. Vatican City: Holy See Press.

Holy See. (1965). Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Second Vatican Council. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

John XXIII. (1963). Pacem in Terris: On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty. Encyclical Letter. Vatican City: Holy See.

John Paul II. (2003). Address to the Diplomatic Corps: The Defeat of Humanity in Iraq. January 13, 2003. Vatican City: Holy See.

Leo XIV. (2025). Lumen Pacis: Light of Peace in a Divided World. Inaugural Encyclical. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Leo XIV. (2026). The Screams of Minab: Angelus Address on the Moral Crisis in the Persian Gulf. March 15, 2026. Vatican City: Holy See Press.

McElroy, R. (2026). Pastoral Letter on the Moral Illegitimacy of Operation Epic Fury. Archdiocese of Washington.

Parolin, P. (2026). Statement on the Illegality of Preventive Force and the Defense of Sovereignty. Vatican Secretariat of State. March 2, 2026.

Tertullian. (c. 211). De Corona Militis (The Soldier's Crown). Translated by S. Thelwall.

Vitoria, F. (1539). De Indis et de Iure Belli (On the Indians and on the Law of War). Relectiones Theologicae. Salamanca.

The author has published over 5,000 AI-assisted papers at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Douglas-Youvan/research . Google Scholar has indexed these preprints, and if you want a particular reference, the AI mode of a Google search (Gemini) has efficiently catalogued these preprints.

THE EVOLUTION OF CATHOLIC JUST WAR DOCTRINE
A Comprehensive Analysis from Antiquity to the 2026 Iran-Coalition Conflict
DE CIVITATE DEI
SUMMA THEOLOGICA